

## What is a Hollow Force?

The term “hollow force” was popularized in the late 1970s in reaction to the Carter administration defense cuts and the degraded condition of the post-Vietnam force. At that time, the term adequately described the force and also resulted in significant funding increases. The “hollow force” term was used again during the mid-to-late 1990s to oppose cuts in defense spending after the Cold War. Today it is being used again, but it requires greater precision in application. A “hollow force” is only one of three different categories of risk we must balance and integrate in a tight fiscal environment, each stemming from deficiencies or imbalances in Readiness, Force Structure, or Modernization (see figure below).

1. A ***hollow force*** is one in which unit effectiveness is systemically degraded, resulting in authorized US forces presenting the illusion of readiness. Deficiencies in resourcing for training, unit equipment, or operations and maintenance could hollow out the force. Similarly, system-wide problems with morale and retention could hamper aggregate unit effectiveness. Likewise, high levels of readiness for unplanned contingencies can come at the expense of OPLAN preparedness, and vice versa.
2. A ***strategy-force structure mismatch*** is a different, but related risk. This occurs when the size, composition, or capabilities of the force cannot keep pace with demand. Even if current demands can be met, not having enough units stresses long-term sustainability. Imbalanced force composition could reduce the effectiveness of high-demand units due to unsustainable dwell rates; or inadequately supported capabilities (manning, equipment, concepts) resulting in units ill-suited for assigned missions.
3. The ***future viability*** of the force is at risk when modernization is neglected. For example, defense budget increases since 9/11 financed wartime operations at the expense of procurement. The same condition could result from under-resourced or ineffectively applied science and technology or research and development accounts, etc. As the security environment evolves, failure to resource modernization risks the capability of the future force.

**Conclusion.** This framework expands the discussion beyond the “hollow force” and captures different risks in a more comprehensive, integrated manner. Each category lends itself to the application of metrics and thresholds that would allow better executive decision-making, given that each service has unique challenges in balancing and integrating these core elements. Using this framework allows for a more focused discussion on the choices we face in a fiscally challenged environment.

